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ABSTRACT

Teacher quality can be improved through teacher evaluation, intervention programs, incentives or rewards, and counseling. In the Toledo, Ohio, peer evaluation program, evaluation and staff development go hand in hand. The program was developed through a collaborative and cooperative process and uses teacher consultants to evaluate and supervise new teachers and veteran teachers experiencing difficulties. Other schools use inservice systems to develop and improve teaching skills. Some teaching institutions are beginning to offer warranties with their teacher graduates. Superior and excellent teachers have been rewarded through career ladders, pay bonuses, and merit pay programs. A merit pay program in Evanston, Illinois has worked because it was developed collaboratively with the local teachers association and because its evaluation committees have a teacher majority. When evaluation leads to a judgment of incompetence and the teacher does not improve, the obvious decision to dismiss can be difficult, costly, and time-consuming. Administrators need to know proper documentation procedures and have good counseling skills. Some schools have developed employee assistance programs for teachers with personal problems, and some provide career relocation assistance in lieu of dismissal. School boards need to develop a comprehensive program to achieve teacher performance improvement and address the problems of incompetent teachers. (MD)

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Improve the quality of teaching in your schools

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What happens when you mention the subject of improving teacher quality?

You probably hear about the pros—and especially the cons—of rewarding performance excellence through such strategies as merit pay, career ladders, or bonus plans, and how higher teacher salaries and career opportunities will or will not attract better teachers.

You also hear blame placed on schools of education for turning out poor products. And permeating most discussions of teacher quality are complaints—and actual accounts—about the difficulty and high cost of dismissing tenured teachers.

In fact, there are so many ideas being debated that you may want to give up in frustration.

Don't! Instead, try clarifying your goals; decide what conditions you want to change; and then collaborate with all involved to develop approaches to achieve each goal.

Assess teacher quality

The unbroken thread running through most discussions about teacher performance is the need to establish and support an effective performance evaluation program. It's difficult to talk about helping teachers improve, rewarding excellent teachers, or removing poor teachers if you don't have a way to assess whether or not teachers are doing a good job.

But performance evaluation is no easy task. Too frequently it is threatening to employees, relies on subjective rather than objective measures, and the results don't achieve improvement because they aren't acted on appropriately.

Another problem that critics are quick to raise is that evaluators don't have the necessary competencies for observing performance, making judgments, and helping teachers improve identified weaknesses. It's important to recognize that a policy supporting evaluation is of little value if it isn't implemented properly. Providing evaluators with evaluation/supervisory training may be necessary.

Also, effective performance evaluation is expensive because it requires time. Supervisors need time to observe teachers on the job, and to confer with teachers before and after observations about what is expected to happen, what was observed, what requires improvement, and how it will be achieved. Supervisors also need time to compile the written evaluation records that are essential for defending employment decisions.

Cooperation builds trust

Developing your evaluation program collaboratively with those involved enables many of these concerns to be addressed and has a better chance of resulting in a program that achieves its goals. When employees have played a part in developing programs that affect them, they can trust the system.

The Toledo (Ohio) peer evaluation program, originally conceived by the local American Federation of Teachers (AFT) affiliate, is a good example of collaboration and cooperation. The program, which was implemented in 1981 and has an annual budget of $80,000, has been publicly endorsed by AFT president Albert Shanker. It involves using teacher consultants to evaluate and supervise new teachers (teachers new to teaching, those moving to a new assignment, and long-term substitutes) as well as veteran teachers who are experiencing difficulty. Teachers have developed trust in the process because they agree with its goals, have faith in the evaluators, and see positive results.

The teacher consultants are selected by the program's Board of Review (five members appointed by the union and four by the administration). They leave classroom teaching for up to three years to fulfill their special duties, and receive a stipend of $1,250.

Considered by their peers to be master teachers, the teacher consultants conduct frequent evaluations and assist teachers in identifying problems and developing improvement strategies. Providing individualized help to improve identified weaknesses is a key component of the program. The teacher consultants also make recommendations to the Board of Review about future employment of teachers assigned to them.

Improve performance

Evaluation and staff development go hand in hand. During evaluation, the supervisor should help the teacher identify specific deficiencies and plan appropriate ways to improve or correct them. Then teachers need to have the opportunity and time to improve.

The Toledo program is an improvement-oriented program because the mentor teachers help teachers improve their skills. In other school systems, inservice programs are geared toward developing and improving specific teacher skills.

Responding to criticism that schools of education aren't doing a good enough job of preparing new teachers, a few institutions (currently six) are sending their graduates into classrooms armed with a warranty. The programs are based on the recognition and acceptance that teacher-training institutions should be accountable.

First-year teachers who graduate from the University of Virginia and are recommended for state certification, for example, will receive one-on-one

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assistance from a university professor if their employer believes the teacher needs help in such areas as classroom management, instruction, and discipline. If necessary, tuition will be waived for summer school courses to help the teacher improve. The warranty applies only to teachers working within Virginia, however.

Next year the University of Arkansas will begin a three-year warranty program. Graduates will be covered by the program if they pass the National Teacher Examination, are certified by the state, and accept a position with an Arkansas public school system. If the teacher experiences difficulty due to a lack of knowledge or ability, university faculty will be called in to develop an individualized improvement plan.

Reward excellence

With a trusted evaluation and staff development program in place, you may decide that teachers whose performance is rated excellent or superior should be recognized and rewarded. There are several methods from which to choose that provide incentives for continued excellence and improvement. They also can provide an alternative path to career growth that allows teachers to continue teaching instead of moving into administrative positions.

Career ladders, for example, typically provide opportunities for professional growth to teachers with proven skills and abilities. Teachers who meet specified performance criteria move up the ladder, receive increased pay according to their placement on the ladder, and frequently increase their responsibilities.

Another approach is to pay bonuses to teachers who perform additional, specialized, or difficult tasks. Often, this method is used to help a school system meet a particular need, such as to fill hard-to-fill positions.

A third method is merit pay: additional pay based on performance evaluation for a job well done.

Frequently, one or more of these approaches is combined. Certainly, their implementation varies among school systems based on such factors as available funding, school board commitment and philosophy, and teacher interest and support. In tailoring a program to your school system's needs, a few issues to consider are:

- Should the program be voluntary or mandatory?
- Should both competence and excellence be rewarded, or only excellence?
- Should performance-based pay be incorporated into the teacher's salary permanently or awarded annually to those who qualify each year?
- Would nonmonetary rewards (e.g., special assignments, attendance at conferences, publicizing accomplishments) achieve the goals?

One successful program

"Merit pay is available in two ways," said Ronald Mackert, director of personnel for School District 67 in Evanston (Ill.). "They either participate through our Committee Evaluation System, which has been operating since 1965, or through our Personnel Evaluation System."

The first requires the teacher to apply and the process involves committee review and verification of the activities and accomplishments that the teacher believes justify movement to a higher track in the system's five-track schedule. (Beginning teachers with a B.A. start in Track One, while those with M.A. degrees start in Two.)

"The focus is on classroom activities," said Mackert, "but higher tracks place additional emphasis on activities that have a school, district, state, or national impact."

Mackert says the system, which can mean about $2,000 above the standard increment to teachers who successfully move to a new track, has worked because it was developed collaboratively with the local teachers' association and because the evaluation committees have a teacher majority.

"The review is thorough, but time consuming," said Mackert. The time involved, plus the fact that some teachers just don't take the initiative to apply, caused the school system and teachers' association to collaborate on an alternative approach.

The alternative Performance Evaluation System bases track movement on end-of-year evaluation by principals or supervisors. Three consecutive superior ratings, for example, justify a movement to Track Two. The highest tracks require four consecutive superior ratings or four out of seven such ratings. Participation in school system committees also is used as a basis for decisions; the school board believes that excellent teacher performance includes involvement in staff and program development activities.

"The 'average' teacher can stay in Track One or Two forever if they want to," said Mackert, "and they continue to receive standard step increases. The evaluation program identifies those teachers who need help to improve, as well as the few teachers who shouldn't be teaching."

Confront incompetence

Evaluation programs can be geared toward improvement and also toward accountability. When evaluation leads to a judgment of teacher incompetence, and the teacher, over a period of time, proves to be unwilling or unable to improve, the logical next step is to dismiss the teacher.

Easier said than done, you say. Probably so. And the process, which can result in litigation, could be costly as well as time consuming.

Nevertheless, if the education of children is your primary mission, incompetent teachers don't belong in classrooms—anybody's classrooms. Policies that permit principals to encourage a poor teacher to transfer to another school are undermining the school system's mission.

Instead, evaluation policies and the principal's or other supervisor's job description must ensure that supervisors are held accountable for the per-

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formance of teachers. To do so effectively, supervisors need a thorough knowledge of how to document poor performance and the skills to counsel teachers to improve. They also need a thorough grounding in dismissal procedures so that justifiable appeals are avoided.

Noninstructional problems

Sometimes poor teaching isn't the result of inadequate knowledge or poor teaching skills. Instead, personal problems may be interfering with the teacher's performance.

These include such problems as an illness in the family, alcoholism or drug abuse, financial burdens, tiredness from working a second job, divorce, and burn-out. Signs that a teacher may be experiencing a personal problem include excessive absenteeism, tardiness, poor relationships with colleagues and/or students—all behaviors that directly or indirectly affect an individual's job performance.

Some school systems have established employee assistance programs (EAPs), frequently at the urging of employee organizations, that make appropriate and timely help available by referring employees to community social service agencies. In operating such programs, ensuring the privacy of individuals is essential, as is the right of the individual to refuse help even when a referral is made by the person's supervisor.

But, while the act of seeking assistance from the EAP shouldn't jeopardize an individual's job status, employees must understand that a personal problem is not a justifiable excuse for continued poor job performance. The employee, given reasonable time, must show improvement and also maintain acceptable job performance.

EAP costs can include paying a school employee to coordinate the program or contracting with an outside counseling agency, training supervisors to identify people who may benefit from assistance, as well as paying therapy or other fees for qualifying employees.

But money also can be saved by reducing absenteeism, thus paying fewer substitutes, and cutting health insurance costs through reduced claim filing. Most important, such programs can result in more productive and effective staff members.

Career relocation

Not everybody can be a good teacher. Others "burn out" after a while, but don't know how else to earn a living or how to go about changing careers. When a teacher is found to be incompetent through performance evaluation, and doesn't improve given assistance and time, the usual solution is to begin dismissal proceedings.

An alternative approach, however, and one that is more positive in nature, less adversarial, and probably less time consuming and costly to a school system, is to provide career relocation assistance.

"Historically, people have looked for career stability," said John Whiting, president of CCS Career Consulting Service (Morristown, N.J.). "When stability isn't available, career relocation helps change occur."

Whiting also sees a logical link between career relocation and EAPs. "The personal or emotional problems people experience frequently are the result of job dissatisfaction," he said, "and career change would be the appropriate solution."

Whiting has expanded his organization's focus beyond corporate outplacement to include placing educators in new careers. "While merit pay and other incentives build on the positive," said Whiting, "career relocation deals with the negative—employees who shouldn't be doing what they're doing."

Comprehensive program

There's no *one* way to improve teaching quality. Evaluation helps teachers find out what to improve. Development and intervention programs help them to improve. Incentives and rewards recognize their efforts. Dismissal and counseling remove ineffective teachers from classrooms. School boards need to address each of these components and develop a comprehensive program to achieve improved teacher performance. ■

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- assiduously minimizing school system endorsement, encouragement, support, and supervision of these religious activities.

In contrast, school officials who want to keep such groups out of the public schools can reduce their legal liability by:

- allowing noncurriculum-related student groups to meet only—if at all—during a club period *within* the school day;
- limiting before and after-school clubs to curriculum-related activities;
- using, where possible, provable grounds of limited space and substantial disruption for denying access to high school prayer groups.

The only other thing school officials can do, whether they wish to accommodate or to reject such groups, is to pray (albeit quietly, individually, or at home) that some other school system becomes the test case for determining whether and where this area is navigable.

Words of caution

In sum, the channels surrounding oral prayer, silent meditation, and student prayer groups are respectively, if not permanently, marked: "Don't," "Wait," and "Pr ." ■

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to each elementary. They go wherever the need is on a given day, but most serve at least 50 percent of their time at their base school.

"Last year we had only 15 days we didn't need 23 or more substitutes," said Burns. "The full-timers then report to the base building and are given an assignment by the principal."

High standards maintained

The full-time substitutes meet all qualifications for the standard 180-day contract. "They are interviewed as is any other teacher applicant," said Burns, "but become substitutes when no permanent position is available."

Broken Arrow's full-time substitutes qualify for all benefits, except membership in the teacher retirement system, and their contract year counts as a year of experience toward salary increases and state certification requirements. They receive a daily rate of $58, instead of the $40 to $45 that part-time substitutes are paid.

"They also are required to participate in staff development, the same as regular teachers," Burns said, "and they are continually evaluated."

"The permanent substitutes cost more money, but they're well worth it. These people understand the school system policies, give us a corps of excellent teachers to fall back on, and, most important, really teach when they're in the classroom." ■